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DAYTON DAILY NEWS

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“Spirit of the Elbe”

All year the Dayton Daily News is honoring the anniversary of the end of World War II with special coverage.

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The front page of a 1945 edition of the ‘New York Times’ hangs in honor on the wall of a home in Oakwood.

The main photo captures one of the iconic images of the final days of World War II. Two groups of soldiers stand awkwardly, shaking hands, teetering over a broken span of bridge deck over the Elbe River in Germany. It is clearly a posed photo, taken 70 years ago.

The massive headline: “U.S. and Red armies join; split Germany.”

One man, Chaim Thau, is standing in the middle staring straight into the camera. Thau, a Polish citizen who was drafted into the Soviet Army as a translator as they swept through his home country, had not met Americans before that moment.

It was a brief encounter. Thau chatted in German with some U.S. soldiers about their homelands. Men in their units traded vodka for chocolate bars. Then Thau’s Red Army unit drove off. They had to join the final fighting in the streets of Berlin. He was shot in the jaw, hospitalized, and recovered. The war was soon over. Thau returned to his Polish village.

“Basically everything was destroyed,” said his son, retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Jeffrey Thau of Oakwood. “There was nothing there for him to go back to. But he remembered what the GIs on the bridge told him about the United States and the land of opportunity.”

This weekend Jeffrey Thau will be in Torgau, Germany, to help commemorate the 70th anniversary of that moment above the Elbe River. The community of Torgau has marked the occasion ever since the end of the war, and this is Thau’s third visit to the commemoration.

Jeffrey remembers how his father, who died 20 years ago, was surprised by the photo shoot. As a Polish citizen of Jewish faith, he had fought in his hometown as a partisan against the Germans until the Soviets swept through.

The war had been going on for Europeans for six years, and the U.S. forces had been fighting for four. War correspondents like those following the 69th Division were constantly on the lookout for stories and photos to give hope to their readers back home that the war might soon be over.

As the U.S. forces advanced into Germany from the west, Soviet forces pushed from the East.

For two days in late April, 1945, American patrols had been watching out for the Red Army between the rivers Mulde and Elbe. The rising number of oncoming German refugees, trying to reach the area captured by the American Forces, and the thunderous cannonade of artillery bore witness to their speedy arrival.

On April 25 1945, several encounters along the river Elbe between the cities of Torgau and Riesa took place between members of the American 69th Infantry Division and the 58th Guards Division of 1st Ukrainian Front of the Red Army.

Stunned relief characterized the encounter in the blossom-scented air on that flourishing spring day. For both of Germany's opponents it was not only visible but also palpable proof that the war could not go on much longer: it was already possible to shake the other's hand.

Joy spread out followed by curiosity about the legendary "comrade in arms:" the Red Army with its female soldiers adorned with skirts and guns, and the better-equipped American GIs.

"Spirit of the Elbe"

The Americans, who had started in Normandy, had fought their way forward through France and the German Reich and had seized the cities of Kassel and Leipzig during their advance. They were now linked with units from the Red Army, who had pursued the German armed forces along its way since Stalingrad.

The allies could not have been more diverse, since the ideological contrasts and the mutual propaganda had fed the fires of stereotyped prejudices and deep-rooted suspicion both among the ranks of the commanders and the ranks of the infantry.

However, Thau's memories, combat narratives and pictures of that time portray laughing soldiers sitting on jeeps, comradely embraces, happily posed photos in front of flags.

"The Americans and the Soviets were still a little bit uneasy when they first met," Jeffrey Thau said. "That soon relaxed when they started exchanging vodka for some of the chocolate bars the us military used to carry. It became sort of a party like atmosphere."

Lieutenant Thau remembered those moments fondly. He told his son later that he and his comrades had to roll their daily tobacco rations in rouble bills from their pay, assuming that they

would never be able to spend them, the supply situation of the Americans was notably better and not just with regard to tobacco.

This unexpectedly positive experience with the “class enemy” and “comrade in arms” was such an impressive display of camaraderie for the low ranking soldiers in particular that it went down in history as the “Spirit of the Elbe.” As it says on the trilingual bronze plaques at the memorial of Torgau, the spirit urges the peoples of all nations to resolve their differences by peaceful means and should serve as an eternal beacon to all nations.

Over the course of two days, the soldiers were allowed to visit and greet one another without any type of supervision, after which the commanders prohibited these exchanges. From then on, only registered and accompanied meetings were permitted. This was also true for the war correspondents on both sides in order to prevent spying.

When Thau returned slightly injured to his hometown after the war he discovered that his entire family had been extinguished by members of the German security police. Nothing kept him from leaving. He left the Red Army behind and made his way to Salzburg, Austria. After spending a couple of years as a displaced person, he was able to immigrate to the United States with the help of a Jewish refugee organization and became an American citizen.

He moved to Milwaukee, married and raised a family - two sons and a daughter. He ran two auto repair shops, and every few years the local paper would do another anniversary story about the famous moment captured in the photo, Jeffrey Thau said. His father was very proud of his small role in history.

The moment captured in the photo lives on. The image was the basis for one of the bas-relief sculptures that are built into the National WWII Memorial in Washington D.C.

“(My father) lived the American dream and the country actually gave that to him,” Jeffrey Thau now says. “When he raised us he instilled two major points with us: One to get an education and make sure that you excel in whatever you can do and the other is to remain patriotic to our country.”